Historicising the journalist–audience relationships in the internet era: A case study of the Slovenian newspaper Delo

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Summary: The study's aim is to reveal how tensions between continuity and change in journalist–audience relationship evolved with the rise of the internet in the news industry and how journalists working in specific institutional settings have conceived audience members and negotiated their online connections with them in the last two decades. Previous scholarly works indicate historical diversity in articulations of the concepts of access, interaction and participation in mediatized political life, which are reflected in the complex dynamics of journalists' conceiving of audiences based on quantifiable and generative sources. The research objective is addressed in the context of Slovenian journalism in the internet era, more specifically the leading Slovenian newspaper Delo, and aims to offer insights into diachronic diversity within journalist–audience relationship from the setting up of Delo.si website in late-1990s, opening up weblogs to audience members online in mid-2000s, to journalists' move to Facebook and Twitter in recent years. Despite this case study's limited scope historical analysis of the journalist–audience relationship at Delo reflects a silhouette of journalism's Janus face – on the one side, the newspaper is adopting technological changes to envision a better future through various online interactive forms, but on the other side Delo is looking back and leaning on journalists' traditional communication privileges downsizing participation in news and established corporate logics of the news industry in order to retain the top-down character of the journalist–audience relationship.

Keywords: journalist–audience relationship, audience conceiving, the internet, historicizing, Slovenia

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Introduction

Through the societal consolidation of the internet as a relevant communication environment the journalist–audience relationship has transformed substantially in the last two decades (see Allan and Thorsen, 2009; Rosenberry and St. John III, 2010; Tunney and Monaghan, 2010; Singer et al., 2011). Namely, media and journalism scholars identify different modes of audience engagement in the news making processes (e.g., Deuze, 2007; Nip, 2010; Jones and Salter, 2012), find patterns of changes in the established notion of news toward multi-perspectivity (e.g., Himelboim and McCreery, 2012; Hermida, 2013; Barkho, 2013), and question the boundaries between conventional roles of journalists as authors and audiences as recipients (Bruns, 2009; Heinonen, 2011; Vobič and Dahlgren, 2013). These works signify a power struggle within the journalist–audience relationship, a struggle that pivots on the degrees of participation in respect to particular social, technological, and institutional settings – some newsrooms have been more open to changes, others more reluctant (e.g., Dahlgren, 2009; Thurman and Hermida, 2010; Robinson, 2010; Paulussen, 2011).

Despite the great attention for changes in the journalist–audience relationship in the internet era, there appears to be a research void in exploring discontinuities in these relational dynamics, as only few studies have historicised contemporary audiences' connections to news, more precisely citizen journalism (i.e. Ryfe and Mensing, 2010; Allan, 2009). As critical history shows, journalism's development has not manifested itself as a progressive evolution determined by technological innovation, but as a flow of discontinuities and beginnings, where journalistic tradition is reinvented (Hardt, 2008). In the context of "the dramatic change", as Hardt (2008: 5) writes, when journalism's autonomy is being embedded in politics and commerce, and where uncertainty, flux, change and conflict are permanent everyday conditions, the analytic need to historicise becomes important. In this sense, scholarly works indicate historical diversity in the articulation of the concepts of access, interaction and participation in mediatized political life (see Carpentier et al., 2014), which are reflected in the complex dynamics of journalists' audience conceptions based on quantifiable and generative sources (see Vobič, 2014). Yet, there is little knowledge of how the struggle between minimalist and maximalist articulations of audience participation has developed within the journalist–audience

relationship since the early years of the internet and how journalists' audience conceptions has shifted within socially and technologically different contexts.

Thus, this study's aim is to reveal how tensions between continuity and change in the journalist–audience relationship evolved with the rise of the internet in the news industry and how journalists working in specific institutional settings have conceived audience members and negotiated their online connections with them in the last two decades. It can be argued that a study with such focus is relevant, because it aims to investigate normative-empirical tensions within the journalist-audience relationship in respect to the concepts of access, interaction and participation in the contemporary multi-perspective communication environment, and to look into the journalists' non-exclusive position as information and interpretation providers. This research objective is addressed in the context of Slovenian journalism in the internet era, more specifically the leading Slovenian print medium Delo, and aims to offer insights into the diachronic diversity within journalist-audience relationship from the setting up of Delo.si website in late-1990s, the opening up of weblogs for audience members in mid-2000s, to the journalists' move to Facebook and Twitter in recent years. The analysis is based on data gathered through in-depth interviews with Delo journalists, editors and other newsroom staffers who have made news for the internet – from those who worked as one-man bands in 1990s, through the members of the separated online department in 2000s, to cross-media journalists publishing in print, online and social media in early 2010s.

Conceptual background: Considering journalists-audiences online relationships

Between access, interaction and participation

Media and journalism scholars acknowledge that with the advent of the web and more recently social media networks, journalism is much more likely to give feedback and provide easy access to the newsroom, getting members of the audience involved in interaction with journalists, and bringing non-press actors closer to the news making process through different participatory practices (see Deuze, 2007; Allan and Thorsen, 2009; Rosenberry and St. John III, 2010; Tunney and Monaghan, 2010; Singer et al., 2011; Dahlgren, 2013). In

this context, the authors of the longitudinal project *State of the Media* (2006) stress that journalism has been going through “a seismic transformation” as power is moving away from journalists while “the people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen, 2008) are assuming a more active, even participatory role as gatherers, assemblers and creators of news. While the news industry desperately tries to enhance classical principles and practices of journalism (Hermida and Thurman, 2008; Domingo et al., 2008; Deuze, 2009; Nip, 2010; Jones and Salter, 2012; Hermida, 2013), research identifies a serious disruption of power in the journalist–audience relationship, even to the extent that Jones and Salter (2012: 119) identify “the people formerly known as the journalists”. The tensions between inclusive and exclusive forces in journalism indicate that the power struggle is indeed taking place within the relationship. Thus, it appears to be useful in this context to reconsider the notions of access, interaction and participation which are at the heart of the debates on people’s linkage with the media sphere and also participation in political life (see Carpentier et al., 2014).

The concept of access is articulated as “presence” of news relevant for political life as well as presence of technological and institutional infrastructure to produce news and enable feedback (Carpentier, 2011: 30). From a historical perspective, as is acknowledged by Splichal (2003), societal conditions that would allow for the idea of access have never fully materialized because of the unequal possibilities of entry into the media field, the uneven distribution of communication competences, and the reduction of public debates to the legitimization of dominant opinions created by political-economic power elites. With the rise of online communication systems, the visions of “computopia” (Masuda, 1980/1983) argued for a progressive conceptual transition towards the idea of the right to access as a normative model for the future. Yet, later works refuted utopian (as well as dystopian) visions as they identified the “digital divide” (Servon, 2002) and acknowledged the trend of the “normalization of the cyberspace” (Margolis and Resnick, 2000) where “old” political power structures and corporate logics limit the “new” character of presence in societal life. Nevertheless, as far as the journalist–audience relationship is concerned, more complex articulations of access can be identified than in the mass media world (see Rosenberry and St. John III, 2010; Tunney and Monaghan, 2010; Singer et al., 2011). Yet, what appears as journalism’s struggle to regain political relevance by bringing audience members closer to the news (Gitlin, 2009), a

clear commercial motive is often at work, such as recruiting audience members as free labour, getting income from targeted advertising, and setting up online projects for niche audiences (Jones and Salter, 2012).

The notion of interaction refers to the establishment of “socio-communicative relationships” within the social, technological and institutional predispositions that enable collective production and mutual reception in the media sphere (Carpentier, 2011, 30). Historically, as Hardt (1998) argues in his book *Interactions*, the roles of individuals – “consumers” as well as “newsworkers” – are embedded in hegemonic relations between media and society where journalism’s connection with its audience members is subordinated to the “ferocious appetite” for commercial gains that limit public interests (Hardt, 1998: 191). Interactional features of the digital communication environment open up the potential for structural disruption and for “new relationships” between journalists and audience members (Dahlgren, 1996: 65). In this context, Joyce Y. M. Nip (2006: 216) discusses the agency of “interactive journalism”, that is, mediated interpersonal communication between journalists and audience members prior to, or after, news publication. Despite many interactive modes that engage audiences in news, such as the “customization” of news relay (e.g., Jones and Salter, 2012), audience members’ “gatewatching” practices (e.g., Bruns, 2009), or institutionalized “user-generated content” contributions (e.g., Singer and Ashman, 2009), journalists tend to retain control on the news production in order to maintain their power of primary negotiators of social reality (see Nip, 2010).

The concept of participation refers to “co-deciding” and differs from access and interaction in respect to the “equal(ized)” power relations in decision-making (Carpentier, 2011: 29). Through the historical prism, as Carpentier et al. (2014: 132) stress, participation within and through the media has mostly been marginal from a society-wide perspective, but far from insignificant when alternative, community and radical “small media” are concerned. The popularization of the internet and particularly web 2.0 has significantly facilitated possibilities for what Carpentier (2011: 29) calls participation in the media (here news) (“content-related participation”) and in organizational decision-making (“structural participation”). There have been attempts to stimulate content-related participation in the news industry, for instance, by the “public journalism movement” in mid-1990s in the United States, but ideas of providing accessible

news so that audience members would impact on news coverage and engage in larger problem-solving behaviour, have fallen short within the established corporate logics (Rosenberry and St. John III, 2010). Yet, outside the mainstream news institutions there are numerous examples of not only content-related, but also structural participation in the shape of what Jones and Salter (2012: 60) call “multiperspectival journalism”. For instance, Wikinews, developed between 2003 and 2005, stimulates collaborative news making and open editing after publication, on the one hand, and is organized on the basis of horizontal structure in which formal hierarchy is rejected, on the other. (Jones and Salter, 2012)

Despite substantial attention to the concepts of access, interaction and participation in studies concerning journalism and audiences, there appears to be a void in diachronic investigations of journalist–audience online encounters in respect to presence, their socio-communicative relationships, and co-deciding processes. Media and journalism research in Slovenia has dealt with the concepts of access, interaction and participation foremost in its theoretical investigations of public opinion (e.g., Splichal, 1999) and the public sphere (e.g., Splichal, 2012). Empirical research on the journalist–audience relationship have explored these notions only superficially when dealing with other issues, such as the “normalization of the blog” (Vobič, 2007), “pseudo-citizen journalism” (Poler Kovačič and Erjavec, 2008), and “offensive speech on news websites” (Erjavec and Poler Kovačič, 2012). Nevertheless, these studies suggest that while access to the news is technologically enabled through the strong internet penetration in Slovenia, and transition of the leading media online, interactive (let alone participative) journalist–audience online relationships are limited to narrow corporate interests reflecting an “unusual connection between the past socialist and contemporary profits-oriented journalistic practices and behaviour patterns” (Poler Kovačič and Erjavec, 2008: 874). Thus, this study attempts to provide more insights in the dynamic journalist–audience relationship in order to better understand the struggle between the “minimalist” and “maximalist” articulations of participation (Carpentier, 2011: 28) in Slovenian online journalism from its beginnings. The first research question then becomes:

RQ1: How have concepts of access, interaction and participation manifested through the journalist–audience relationship with the rise of the internet within Slovenian news institutions?

Audience conceiving in online news making

As discussed above, in the last two decades considerable scholarly attention has been put to changes in the journalist–audience relationship, but there are only a few accounts on how contemporary journalists conceive the presumably empowered audience members and how generative and quantifiable sources on audiences are articulated in the newsrooms (i.e., MacGregor, 2007; Hujanen, 2008; Anderson, 2011). Scholarship dealing with these issues acknowledges them, but only as secondary as it primarily concentrates on other matters (MacGregor, 2007: 280): studies of journalists' attitudes towards their audience, investigations into market pressures in journalism and the industrial construction of audience perspectives, and explorations dealing with news values. The rare accounts that primarily focus on audience conception among journalists re-emerged only in the last two decades. In this sense, two waves of research on audience conception among journalists can be identified (see Vobič, 2014): first, newsroom-centric studies from a socio-organizational approach conducted between 1960s and 1980s, second, recent newsroom ethnographies from a cultural analysis perspective since the early 2000s.

The first wave of research, falling within what Barbie Zelizer (2004) calls “the golden age” of newsroom studies, argues that journalists know little about their audience members and perceive their relationship with them “as an understanding grounded in ignorance and filtered through a lens of professional judgment” (Anderson, 2011: 553). For instance, Atkin et al. (1983: 60) stress that in the newsrooms a “patronizing and unflattering view” of the audiences prevail, making readers, listeners and viewers distant and anonymous. Similarly, to be able to cope with the “uncertainty” of news making (McQuail, 1969), journalists construct their audiences by themselves while taking “the congruence of their own and the audience's feelings for granted” (Gans, 1979: 237). Additionally, Schlesinger (1978/1987) identifies a “missing link” between journalists and audience members, saying that “journalists write for other journalists, their bosses, their sources or highly interested audiences” (107), whereas “the total audience remains an abstraction” (109). In their observational study, Flegel and Chaffee (1971: 649) note that from the standpoint of journalists, “readers' opinions are even less important” than “their own opinions”.

A review of the second wave studies indicates a shift from inquiries of the first wave, suggesting that audience conception in news making has changed.

The inquiries from the early 2000s onwards (Boczkowski, 2004; 2010; Hujanen, 2008; Lowrey and Latta, 2008; MacGregor, 2007; Robinson, 2010; Anderson, 2011) indicate that audience conception among journalists and its implications for news making have gained in complexity with “new” communication technologies enabling easier access to media, and also interactive, even participatory journalist–audience connections as well as quantifiable metrics of audience news engagement. On the one hand, research shows that diversity in audience conception significantly shapes attitudes toward audience engagement in the news. For instance, Boczkowski (2004: 175) reveals that the more journalists describe online audience members as technologically unsavvy, the more they rely on one-way communication. The more journalists conceive audience members as technologically savvy, the more they interact with them. Additionally, Robinson (2010: 125) identifies a “significant internal conflict” between journalists that are “traditionalists” and want to maintain a hierarchal, top-down relationships, and “convergers”, who would like to see audiences closer to the news making. On the other side, Anderson (2011) points out the “growth in audience quantification”, in the sense of a quantifiable and largely consumptive aggregate, indicating the progressive quantification of audience understandings in the news industry. These findings differ from some other inquiries (Boczkowski, 2010; Hujanen, 2008; MacGregor, 2007) into the connection between audience metrics, audience conceptions, and news making routines that suggest a persistence of ideal-typical principles among journalists, such as impartiality in relation to the social world and detachment from the people they are primarily accountable to.

As discussed in more detail elsewhere (see Vobič, 2014), the studies in these two waves adopted different analytical standpoints – the social-organizational approach and the cultural analysis are the two most common – but what appears to be missing are historical insights how different social, technological and institutional contexts actually shape audience conceptions among journalists. Despite rare accounts dealing with audience conceptions among journalists (Vobič, 2013; 2014), media and journalism scholars in Slovenia have neglected the issue. Nevertheless, one can identify a historical trajectory of the audience concept within the dynamic media–people relationship. In this sense, it has been reconstructed in accordance of prevailing conceptualizations of communication, power and history – that is, through the notions of social class in so-

cialism (e.g., Splichal and Vreg, 1986), after the transition to the Western type of democracy through the notions of the public and the mass (e.g., Splichal, 1999), and in recent years as the community and citizenry (e.g., Oblak Črnič, 2010).

The most recent examples dealing with people's participation in the news indicate that Slovenian online journalists in some institutional settings can be divided between "progressive enthusiasts" and "reserved pragmatists" in their narrations of audiences' engagement in online news (Vobič, 2013). At the same time, according to journalists' narratives in some Slovenian newsrooms, they appear to be somehow at the intersection of insights originating from generative sources, such as users' comments and social media activities, and quantifiable sources, such as various audience analytics, when it comes to conceiving their audience members (Vobič, 2014). This study tries to add to this debate by diachronically dissecting audience conceptions among Slovenian journalists operating online in order to know how different historical contexts shape the journalist-audience relationship and what implications these changing arrangements bring to the participation in the news making since mid-1990s, when traditional Slovenian news institutions started moving towards the online. Thus the second research question is:

RQ2: How have journalists of Slovenian traditional news institutions conceived their audiences since the rise of the internet?

Methodology

The goal of this study is to answer both research questions by first investigating how the concepts of access, interaction and participation have been articulated in the changing journalist-audience online relationship since the Slovenian traditional news institutions' transition to the internet, and secondly, by exploring how journalists operating online have conceived their audience in changing social, technological and institutional settings from the mid-1990s onwards. As in previous studies mapping the journalist-audience relationship and identifying audience conceptions among journalists (see Allan and Thorsen, 2009; Rosenberry and St. John III, 2010; Tunney and Monaghan, 2010; Singer et al., 2011; Patriarch et al., 2014) this analysis takes a case study approach to investigate the phenomena in the socially, technologically and in-

stitutionally shifting contexts of the last two decades. The aim is to explore how the journalist–audience relationship evolved through time and how journalists' conceptions of their audiences have been shifting. This case study is qualitative as it probes a particular case rather than providing vast generalizations (see Yin, 2003). In this research, the author deals with the research questions in respect to the major Slovenian print media institution Delo.

The case subjects of this study are former and current editors and journalists operating online at Delo. Delo is the leading Slovenian print media institution in regards to the size of the circulation of its dailies (RPN, 2013), the number of readers of their print outlets (NRB, 2013), and the number of unique visitors to their news website (MOSS, 2013). Delo, self-proclaimed as “the main Slovenian daily”, was established as a “societally owned” newspaper in 1958 (see Splichal, 1995) and went through the privatization process in early 1990s significantly reshaping news making processes and outputs (see Erjavec and Poler Kovačič, 2004). Previous research (Vobič, 2012) shows that the URL Delo.si was registered in 1996 with one journalist taking care of online news making. The newspaper set up its organizationally separated online department in 2004, and in recent years started the process of newsroom convergence, shifting some print and online journalists to cross-platform staffers. Simultaneously, in the last decade, a trend of growing online unique users is clearly visible (MOSS, 2013), whereas the reach and circulation of quality (print) newspapers have considerably shrunk by about 40 % (NRB, 2013; RPN, 2013). Previous studies concerning Delo's relationship with its online audiences show that the newspaper adopted interactive online technologies, whereas the journalist–audience relationship appeared to be “unidirectional” and “monological” in character (Vobič, 2010). One recent example (Oblak Črnič and Vobič, 2013) also acknowledges that the news production culture at Delo (and other Slovenian print media) develops foremost with the aim of retaining control over the process of information delivery rather than creating a new space of dialogue.

Between 2007 and 2013 the author conducted semi-structured interviews with online staffers who established online relationships with Delo audience members in the last two decades years: (1) with the only online journalist and technical editor in the early years of Delo.si [mid-1990s–early-2000s], (2) with two print editors-in chief, three online executive editors, three online editors, and eight online journalists working for a separated online department [mid-

2000s–late-2000s], and (3) with a social media editor and five cross-platform journalists from Delo's integrated newsroom in the recent years [early-2010s]. In the interview conversations, the author adopted a 'heuristic interviewing' (Legard et al., 2003, 140) approach, which emphasises the personal approach of the interviewer and sees the process of interviewing as a collaboration between the researcher and the participant, where both partners share reflections and information. The interview guide was structured, but not fixed – the author adopted it as a tool for a theoretically informed and contextually grounded conversation. The interview conversations appeared as what Hermanns (2004: 212) calls "an evolving drama", in which the interviewer's task is to facilitate the drama's development. Thus, the conversations were steered by the rather flexible application of the guide and the active involvement of the interviewer. The author combined three types of questions, each of which was a distinct stimulus used for a particular purpose in a certain stage of the conversation. First, 'open' (Flick, 2006: 156), 'content-mapping' (Legard et al., 2003, 148) or 'non-directive' questions (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002: 195) were used in order to get the conversation on the topic started; they were answered on the basis of the knowledge the interviewee had at hand (for instance, *Why do you use Twitter?*). Then, the interviewer asked 'theory-driven' (Flick, 2006: 156) questions based on the literature review and the theoretical framework of the study (for instance, *What are the basic characteristics of Twitter communication with the audience members?*). Finally, the third type of questions – 'confrontational' questions (Flick, 2006: 157) or 'content-mining' questions (Legard et al., 2003: 150) – responded to the notions the interviewee had presented up to that point in order to critically re-examine them (e.g. for instance, *How do you explain differences in communication patterns in letters to the editor, users' comments under news items and on social media?*).

The interview conversations had a length between forty minutes to hour and a half. They were recorded and transcribed in full. The author then used Grant McCracken's (1988) 5-step process for analysis qualitative interviews. Based on careful reading, preliminary descriptive and interpretative categories were made based on the set conceptual framework. Later these preliminary codes were thoroughly examined in order to identify connections and patterns in journalists' talk. From there the analysis involved a determination of basic themes by examining clusters of comments made by the interviewed. In the last

step the author examined themes from all interviews across such groupings in order to delineate predominant ones in relation to the two research questions.

Results

The analysis of the in-depth interviews with Delo newsroom staffers reveals a series of discontinuities in the development of journalist–audience relationships during the last two decades, implying different degrees of participation in journalism. The diachronic and synchronic variety in journalists' conceptions of audiences decisively shapes articulations of access, interaction and participation. The interviewees' narrations are predominantly tied to different rather deterministic understandings of technologies that have evolved in the last two decades and are based on simplified generalizations of their social manifestations. For instance, interviews show that Delo's staffers romanticize the offline past through the letters to the editor, and also imagine a bright online future through a variety of participatory forms. Yet, the interview analysis shows that the advent of the internet and the web does not by itself bring about the materialization of access and feedback, let alone interaction and participation. Namely, the contextual specificity of news making, defined by changing tensions between structure and agency, has played an important role in shaping the journalist–audience relationship and articulations of participation in journalism in the last two decades. At the same time, audience conceptions have not been monolithic, but rather spanned from contempt toward those audience members who comment on news stories, through indifference to Delo.si bloggers, to delight with those who send letters to the editor, respond with e-mails, or contribute on Twitter. The next six sections sketch technologically different modes of journalist–audience relationships reflecting different negotiations of presence, socio-communicative relationships, and also co-deciding, and show the complexity of audience conceptions among journalists and editors, mostly based on generative sources as there is a substantial lack of quantifiable insights, as is stressed by interviewees at Delo.

Letters to the editor – “reasoned argumentation”

Since 1950s Delo has continuously published letters to the editor, particularly in its Saturday supplement, where issues of concern are articulated by their

audience members and where occasional journalist–audience interactions occur. On the one hand, interviewees from different time periods picture letters to the editor as a thing “from the past” that is “dying out” (cross-platform journalist A, interview, 1 October 2013), but at the same time they see this method as a communication form based on “reasoned argumentation and care” (former print editor-in-chief [2003–2004; 2006–2008], interview, 7 July 2009). In this sense, Delo provides an infrastructure to receive and distribute feedback on content, and to act as facilitators for debates on public issues. Yet, the newsroom remains fully in control in this particular connection: “The newsroom takes the privilege to publish or not publish the letter, and in accordance to the editorial policies and the layout of the newspaper the editor may shorten or revise the letters received” (Delo, 2013).

With the letters to the editor Delo manifests the right to access, but at the same time retains control in selection and length of letters published. A former print editor-in-chief ([2003–2004; 2006–2008], interview, 7 July 2009) stresses that “each letter dealing with certain journalist’s work used to be a shock to him or her”. “Before the internet journalists were not used to readers’ reactions to their work – they got a phone call or a letter to the editor once in a while. They were worried only about the relationship with their editors; in recent years things have changed.” (former print editor in chief [2003–2004; 2006–2008], interview, 7 July 2009) In any case, interviewees conceive audience members who send letters to the editor as “respectful readers” who “take their time to write a letter of few thousand characters” and “usually built their letters on profound argumentation” (*ibid.*). Recent interviews, however, show that journalists rarely interact with audience members through the letters to the editor – the exceptions are concerned with “mistakes made in my conduct” (cross-platform journalist B, interview, 4 October 2013) or “professional matters” (cross-platform journalist C, interview, 2 October 2013).

E-mail – “huge feedback”

With Delo’s transition to the internet and setting up Delo.si, e-mail was adopted as a method of asynchronic exchanging digital messages between audience members and the newsroom. Indirect interaction, one-to-one or one-to-many, enabled unprecedented socio-communicative journalist–audience encounters, which did not affect the power balance too much. In the first years

of Delo.si, interactions among the only online journalist and audience members were not limited to public issues, but evolved into personal messages. “The feedback was huge back then. [...] E-mail was something new and I could not resist asking readers how they are doing. I was reading all sorts of stories – from depression to love. And with some I became a close friend” (former online journalist [1997–2004], interview, 9 February 2011). At the time online news was a one-man band operation where “one half of the time was spent for repurposing print news onto the portable document format and then delivering it via e-mail, and the other half was spent for answering to readers’ e-mails” (former online journalist [1997–2004], interview, 9 February 2011). After setting up a special online department in 2004, news making dynamics intensified. With speed becoming a primary imperative of editorial policy and with setting up always-on comments sections below online news items, e-mail evolved into a method of interaction with information sources and also an important tool for in-house communicative relations (former print editor-in-chief [2008–2012], 9 February 2011).

However, despite the reduced intensity, some Delo staffers used e-mail to facilitate journalist–audience relationships. Namely, according to interviewees’ answers, the frequency and nature of e-mail interactions with audience members’ depended on staffers’ positions within the decision-making. Editors, on the one hand, received more e-mails mostly concerning already published content, print or online. For instance, “There are really a lot of e-mails. I answer to each and every message I get directly on my e-mail address. If other editors are more competent to answer I ask them to reply” (former print editor-in-chief [2003–2004; 2006–2008], interview, 7 July 2009). On the other hand, journalists’ e-mail exchanges with Delo readers are rare, because they “just do not get them very often” (online journalist A, interview, 27 January 2011). The conceptions of audience members, interacting via e-mails, remained vague with Delo journalists, as it was limited to occasional instances, such as the following: “When I get an e-mail it is usually offensive and I do not reply” (cross-platform journalist C, interview, 2 October 2013).

Audience members’ online comments – “ballast”

In early 2000s Delo.si transformed “from a rather static website to a more dynamic one” (former online executive editor [2004–2008], interview, 5 Sep-

tember 2008), that is, by continuously providing fresh online news and setting up comments sections below online news items. Despite the fact that the audience members' comments provide transparent feedback that is easily enabled users to discuss the news, the journalist–audience relationship has not substantially changed. The interviewed journalists and editors similarly acknowledge the lack of motivation to interact, let alone participate with audience members in the comments sections. They saw them as “full of ballast” (former print editor-in-chief [2003–2004; 2006–2008], interview, 7 July 2009), “just disastrous” (online journalist B, interview, 25 February 2011), and “spittoons” (cross-platform journalist A, interview, 1 October 2013).

In this sense, most of the interviewees fall within a group that could be labelled sceptics. They stress that the online comments sections contribute little to public debates, mostly due to the prevailing anonymity of commentators, which allows more easily for an aggressive and often offensive discourse. According to some interviewees, journalists' involvement in such communication environments moves power away from the journalists towards the audience members. For instance, “The relationship is not fair. We are naked, readers are anonymous. Interaction in the comments section is for a journalist like running over the field naked and observers shoot at him or her. Journalists need to be protected” (former online executive editor [2004–2008], interview, 5 September 2008). Additionally, the sceptics see the journalist–audience relationship as “alienated” since the editors “care about the clicks and that's all” (online journalist B, interview, 25 February 2011). Therefore they often relate to online audience members as “traffic” or “clicks” rather than as a social entity (former online editor [2009–2012], interview, 4 February 2011).

There is also a much smaller group of enthusiasts that see the journalist–audience encounters within the comments sections as social-communicative relationships. For instance, a former print editor in chief [2003–2004; 2006–2008] (interview, 7 July 2009) is himself active in the comments sections' discussions – not with his true name, but with a nickname, “We can easily throw 90% of all users' comments away. Only a very small share of them is useful and gives a new perspective. [...] Useful responses help you to identify your flaws over time. For some it is painful, but in the long run it raises the quality level of journalism.”

Blogs – “just a trend”

In 2005, Delo became the first traditional news institution in Slovenia to invite members of the audience to visit Delo.si and open a blog. To attract audience members they used print and online ads, such as “Have One Too!”, “You, Too, Can Blog!” and “Famous Slovenes also Know How to Blog!”. “The goal was to integrate the community of the website and potentially stimulate interaction.” (former online editor [2004–2010], interview, 4 February 2011). With Delo Blogs section, where discussion or informational pages displayed posts in reverse chronological order, and allowed interactions, the newsroom (at least to a degree) facilitated possibilities for participation – in terms of content.

However, a former online executive editor [2004–2008] (interview, 5 September 2008) revealed that a commercial imperative was behind the project as blogging was “trendy” and “useful to generate online traffic”. In 2008, a year before the blogs section was closed down she clearly acknowledged this position, “We still have this trendy rubric because it lives by itself without any editorial intervention and still loyal readers publish within it. Delo.si does not use any content from the blogs in journalistic reporting, because Delo is a serious newspaper concentrated on serious news.” (former online executive editor [2004–2008], interview, 5 September 2008) In the 2000s, the news making online department of Delo.se focused on continuous news making based on retro-fitting already published news by other media or news agencies. The editor thus noted that online news making is going through the process of “rationalization”, suggesting that online journalists did not have time for nurturing relationships with audience members, “Interactivity is not our focus – it does not popularize. Most of the visitors are attracted only by fresh news and journalists feel vulnerable responding to people’s content, because their identity is usually hidden.” (former online executive editor [2004–2008], interview, 5 September 2008)

Delo wanted its journalists and editors to write blogs, but there was almost no response. “The sense of a blog is that it be written by people who can explain the background and other things that cannot be published in the print edition. At present it is very difficult to get in-house writers. If the work is not mentioned in the job assignments, and it is unpaid, there is no interest.” (former online executive editor [2004–2008], interview, 5 September 2008) As a response, in 2008, the online department created the Delo Opinions section

where audience members could comment on and analyse articles from the print edition. “With Delo Opinions we want to expose leading Delo commentators and to praise them. The goal is to attract visitors and preserve the quality level. Responses from the commentators are not intended.” (ibid.) Delo closed down Delo Blogs and Delo Opinions in 2009, and in 2011 set up another a section with “invited bloggers” in order to “better control the filter” of information and opinions (online journalist C, interview, 20 January 2011).

Social media – “valuable ambient”

In late 2010, Delo opened corporate accounts on social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, which can be regarded as always-on and omnipresent means of interaction and participation among people, individuals and groups, in which they create, share, and exchange information and ideas. However, Delo has used its social media accounts foremost to promote its online and print editions, and not to facilitate journalist–audience interaction or participation that would disturb the established top-down relationship. “I have set up the accounts and taught online news staffers how to operate the corporate account. [...] Mostly we publish the most important and interesting stories, try to stimulate a debate among our friends or followers, and react only to those issues that are concerned with the production process” (social media editor, interview, 26 September 2013). Interviewed online staffers similarly describe their conduct: on Twitter and Facebook they post “the best of” Delo.si (online journalist D, interview, 24 January 2011), their social media activities are “just about presence and not to miss out on anything” (former online editor [2009–2012], interview, 4 February 2011), and what is published are “links with short sentences” and “hardly any reactions” (online journalist B, interview, 25 February 2013).

Delo’s journalists do not have their individual corporate Facebook accounts but print journalists, foremost foreign correspondents and national affairs reporters, who recently started making news for the online as well, set up corporate Twitter profiles. In the interviews they stress that Twitter is “valuable ambient to follow reactions and comments of active and demanding audience” (cross-platform journalist A, interview, 1 October 2013), enables them to “easily get involved with other actors in the public sphere” (cross-platform journalist B, interview, 4 October 2013), or it is “a tool for fast and short communica-

tion with sources or readers” (cross-platform journalist D, interview, 4 October 2013). Some explicitly stress their relationship with audience members in terms of proximity and frequency. They say that “connections are stronger and more frequent” (cross-platform journalist C, interview, 2 October 2013), that the audience members are “a big challenge with their instant replies and constructive debates” (cross-platform journalist A, interview, 1 October 2013), and “a valuable source of ideas for new stories” (cross-platform journalist B, interview, 4 October 2013). Audience conceptions among cross-platform journalists are characterized by generalized sharp distinctions between “critical” and “younger” Twitter users that are “light years ahead of other audience members” (cross-platform journalist A, interview, 1 October 2013), “frustrated” and “offensive” online commentators (cross-platform journalist C, interview, 2 October 2013), and “older” and “better educated” printed newspaper readers (cross-platform journalist D, interview, 4 October 2013).

Online participatory forms – “the future”

The interviews conducted with Delo editors during the last six years clearly indicate that they imagine the future of the journalist–audience relationship as a proliferation of online participatory forms, which would disturb the power relations between journalists and audiences through content-related participation. For instance, in 2007, a Delo online executive editor [2004–2008] (interview, 17 January 2007) stressed that a “sort of citizen journalism would be welcomed”, “People like to communicate; they only need to be guided by someone who is full of ideas, is popular, good with words and has credibility – that’s journalists”. Further, in 2009, an online executive editor [2008–2010] (interview, 10 August 2009) stressed that she planned for a project called Your Delo, which was focused on local news generated by Delo’s readers: “People would send their stories and videos on topics they know. We would then select some of them and publish them online and in print. The best pieces will be awarded”. Additionally, in 2011, an online executive editor [2010–2011] (interview, 1 February 2011) said that she plans to build “Delo’s version of CNN’s iReport, Yes, indeed. We would get stories that we miss with our current team of journalists. Editorial control would be needed, of course.” None of these projects have been realised due to continuous changes in management and supervisory boards, and in chief editorial positions, where the online development of Delo was at best

a secondary matter. “The biggest problem was that members of the board and the editor constantly changed and were preoccupied with other organisational problems. The internet was not their priority” (director of informatics, interview, 22 September 2011).

In autumn 2012, during the weeks of mass protests against political and economic elites in Slovenia, rather paradoxically, the foreign affairs department set up a participatory online form, called *Revolt and Alternatives*. Audience members were invited to “search for alternatives for a better tomorrow” and to “attract the widest possible circle of politically conscious and active citizens” (Delo 2012). A rather small group of journalists took advantage of managerial and editorial disinterestedness and established an online participatory form “to bring together the social capital for change in Slovenia” and “to give voice to the people without a voice” (cross-media journalist E, interview, 6 October 2013). The editorially selected contributions were published at Delo.si and in Delo’s Saturday supplement. Recently an online survey *Revolt Vox Populi* is conducted every week among Delo.si visitors on different societal issues and “compilations” of responses are published in print and online (cross-media journalist E, interview, 6 October 2013). But the same reason that made it easier for the group of journalists to start the project, is now making *Revolt and Alternatives* weak. “We are mostly on our own. We do not have any institutional support. *Revolt* is not the prime project of Delo, therefore it has a marginal place on the website and in the newspaper. I do not know what the future will bring” (cross-media journalist E, interview, 6 October 2013).

Discussion and conclusion

The historical case study of the journalist–audience relationships indicates that this relational development is not a linear process, but rather a process shaped by discontinuities and non-progressive historical movements. From this perspective, the historical assessment reflects a diachronic variation in the evolution of journalist–audience relationships in respect to the complex articulations of access, interaction and participation in the internet era, as well as, a synchronic variation in audience conceptions among journalists and editors implying distinct perceptions of people’s potentials to participate in journalism in the last two decades.

The investigation of how these concepts of access, interaction and participation have manifested themselves through the journalist–audience relationship with the rise of the internet shows that Delo has followed a series of technological developments of interactive online tools, such as comments sections, blogs and social media. But journalists and editors have neglected the emergence of the “people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen, 2008), even if this metaphor is slightly utopian. At Delo, they have been primarily focused on remaining the central providers of information and interpretation in public life and on the media market, therefore journalists and editors have done little to respond to the difficulties of the rising “multi-epistemic order” (Dahlgren, 2009) grounded on late-modern concepts of individualization, heterogeneity and fragmentation. In this context, it appears that the people’s presence in the mediatized political life, interactive socio-communicative relationships between journalists and audiences, and participatory decision-making in news is usually manifested within the corporate logics where the communication rights of citizens, journalists and audience members remain subordinated to property rights of media owners (see Splichal, 1999). Only recently have some Delo journalists started to routinely engage in interactions with audience members outside Delo news website, that is, on Twitter, and set up participatory online forms within Delo.si when managerial and editorial decision-makers were focused on other matters than online content and online relationships decision-making. If such instances of adjusting journalist–audience relationships remain exceptions in the “ambient” communication environment (Herminda, 2013), where broad, asynchronous, lightweight and always-on information and interpretation streams create various kinds of relationships around and within the news, the future of journalism as a relevant social institution and cultural practice appears troubling.

The case study’s exploration of how journalists of traditional news institutions have conceived their audiences in the internet age indicates that these perceptual dynamics are far from uniform, but heterogeneously based on particular technological and institutional settings. Various superficial generalizations in journalists’ audience conceptions that span a wide range of options, from the refusal of audience members’ relevance in news to the enthusiasm for closer journalist–audience encounters, indicates what Gitlin (2009) names journalism’s “crisis of authority” implying difficulties to bring people closer to the

news through interactive, let alone participatory practices. Journalism's troubles of (re)engaging with the people they are primarily responsible to, is particularly evident in the contemporary communication environment where "customization" and "multiplication" of news appear as prevalent trends (see Jones and Salter, 2012). In this context, journalists of traditional news institutions appear in need to rethink the services they provide to their clients. For instance, Pöttker (2012) suggests that journalists should adopt a "curator" role in order to overcome the monolithic character of traditional news provision and adapt to multi-perspectivity of contemporary news environment. If journalism at Delo (and elsewhere) does not reshape the often detached journalist-audience relationship and start stimulating participation in journalism, mainstream as well as alternative news will have a difficult task of distinguishing themselves from political spin and entertainment (see Dahlgren, 2013). Now it seems that the trend of fragmentation of the common communicative ground, facilitated by political and commercial interests, will continue deepening the troubles of the public sphere (see Splichal, 2012).

Despite this case study's limited scope, the historical analysis of the journalist-audience relationships at Delo reflects a silhouette of journalism's Janus face – it is adopting technological changes to envision a better future through various online interactive and participatory forms, but at the same time journalism is looking back and leaning on its traditional communication privileges and established corporate logics. As social communication is becoming inherently transgressive, boundary-breaking and all-eroding (see Singer et al., 2011; Jones and Salter, 2012; Dahlgren, 2013; Carpentier et al., 2014) the study indicates that the journalism does not provide proper answers, as it faces continuous structural challenges, organisational difficulties and identity uncertainties. Journalism is historically placed between its structural location and its individual aspect, de-emphasising structural determinism at least to a degree, where the journalists' engagement of people in public life and the reasoning of social reality are concerned. Therefore, the future explorations of the journalist-audience relationships would not only benefit from transnational comparative historicizing, combined with qualitative and quantitative methodologies, but also from comprehensive analyses of the role of history and tradition in context-bound diachronic negotiations of the journalist-audience relationship and of civic participation in journalism.

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